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AUTHOR Hassett, Jacquelyn
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ABSTRACT

An overview is presented of guidelines drawn up for the development of health programs for junior and community colleges by the American College Health Association. The responsibilities of college health practitioners in the field of oral and dental health are emphasized. (JD)

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Oral Health - Whose Responsibility?

JACQUELYN HASSETT, R.N., B.S.
Director, Health Services
College of Lake County
19351 W. Washington St.
Grayslake, Ill. 60030

SP 014533

Oral Health - Whose Responsibility?

As community college health practitioners we are accustomed to identifying, assessing and managing a wide variety of health problems each day. One of the areas which is frequently examined is the pharynx. Usually, this examination follows the chief complaint of a sore throat. At this very moment the opportunity is "wide open" for an overall assessment of oral health.

Even though we may not be doctors or dentists we can learn to detect abnormal conditions through careful observations, discussions with and instruction from consultants, programs of continued education, and reading journals. By learning all we can about oral health, we will be able to develop greater self-assurance in discussing problems with students and providing the appropriate follow-up for them.

The College of Lake County is situated in the geographical center of an urban and rural population of 450,000. We have a current enrollment of approximately 10,000 full-time and part-time students. Health Services are provided by registered nurses from 8:30 A.M. to 10:00 P.M. The college offers a program of Dental Assisting which graduates about 18 students each year. Lake County is fortunate to have a very viable County Health Department which has a program of Preventive Dentistry.

During the past three years I had the opportunity to serve on the Commission on Ethics and Standards of ACHA. One of my responsibilities on that Commission was to review preliminary reports of findings of certification teams for college and university health services throughout the country.

After reading some of the reports I became increasingly aware, and eventually increasingly alarmed that apparently so little attention was being given to oral health of students. Some of the responses under Dental Services that the colleges and universities provided were:

1. Dental clinic, dental hygiene and preventive services, restorative services, emergency care and extractions.
2. Current dental service with a donated chair and a modified fee for service during noon hours on weekdays.
3. None.
4. No dentist or services being considered by the Advisory Board.
5. No services - list of local dentists.
6. No provisions
7. No provisions - rapport with community dentist.
8. No dental health program - no information available.

Last year ACHA formulated Minimum Standards for Certification of a College Health Program. Item No. 17 reads "Provision shall be made for dental services for students and other subscribers." This statement has been interpreted as the obligation to provide, at the least, an appropriate referral for dental problems. I am sure that that is the least we can provide; and I know that we have the ability to provide even more for our consumers.

For program guidelines, I would like to refer to The Development of Health Programs for Junior and Community Colleges, the section on Dental Health. The objectives, program description, and methods of implementation are excellent guidelines for the development of more than minimal dental services.

Throughout the past eight years the College of Lake County Health Service has responded to the need for attention to oral health by several methods.

1. The utilization of bulletin boards and display cases for posters and pamphlets.
2. The inclusion of a dental section in our annual health fair. This display is a cooperative effort between the Lake County Health Department and the college's dental assistant students. The fair serves as an additional educational experience for the students while they receive supervision by the county dental hygienists.
3. Inclusion of statements regarding dental health and the name of their dentist on our student and employee health forms. This may seem rather insignificant, but it does promote thought and discussion of oral health, especially with our athletic physicals.
4. The use of dental floss samples. Samples are available in assorted sizes and thus, are convenient for different approaches. In addition to the promotion of brushing and flossing in the Health Service, we take advantage of the opportunity provided during our open registrations. The Health Service has a staffed table with information on numerous health topics. Dental pamphlets and samples of floss do attract the attention of the prospective students, and they are usually willing to take a few minutes of their time for a word of encouragement for daily self-care.

5. Providing an Oral Health Day. Screening for oral health was accomplished by working with county health department personnel and the dental assistant program. This screening service was organized into eight stations:

    a. Sign-up

    b. Quiz yourself

    c. Oral Screening

    d. Throat swabs and ear exams

    e. Plaque control

    f. Fluoride treatment

    g. Nutrition counseling

    h. Referral and evaluation

6. Offering a one-day seminar on nutrition. This seminar was developed primarily for school nurses throughout the county, and was organized with the assistance of a representative from the Milk Foundation. We presented new techniques and teaching aids which could be adapted to different age levels. The University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, the American Diabetes Association, local dietitians, and the Lake County Health Department provided a wealth of information not only on nutrition, but also on the relationship of nutrition to oral health.

7. The referral system. We have a list of reputable dentists and specialists who are located in all areas of the county. The coordinator of the dental assistant program developed the list following her personal observations of the practices. The referrals

are not necessarily low-cost, but all of the private practices are reasonable in cost. Here, we do not intervene on behalf of a student. We feel that students must learn to be totally responsible for their oral health. If finances are really a problem, we do have two low-cost clinics available. We are also fortunate to be situated mid-way between Chicago and Milwaukee. Our students and staff may elect to utilize the services of the dental schools of several universities.

8. The monthly newsletter. Our newsletter is titled Medical Memos and is the product of our very talented secretary in the Health Service. Periodically we include dental and oral health items which we think will be of interest to the college community.
9. Seizing every opportunity to alert and educate. Oral health promotions need not be limited to students who come to the Health Service for a particular oral problem. What about the consumers who come in for unrelated problems? What do their teeth and gums look like as they are talking to you? It is not always an easy task to direct the conversation toward oral hygiene, but in my experience, most of the students are receptive to suggestions.... and free samples. It is so very important to emphasize that the simple, daily routine of flossing and brushing can do so much for the maintenance of healthy teeth and gums.
10. Consult with your own dentist. If there is a question regarding care or services, I don't hesitate to call my own dentist for a consultation.

This year our college participated in the National Health Screening and "Oral Health" was included. Students from the University of Illinois College of Dentistry and several local dentists staffed the four chair station, which was an optional stop. One of the dentists noted on his evaluation that many of the participants seemed to avoid the oral screening. He felt there is a real need to educate the general public to avail themselves of free screening services.

As community college health practitioners, I firmly believe that it is our responsibility to do all we can to put the responsibility for oral health where it belongs - on the individual! Incidentally, did you brush and floss today?